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ABSTRACT

One of the themes frequently appearing in the literature on student retention is that a primary determinant of student persistence is the interaction between students and faculty. Research reveals that students' educational intentions, goal commitment, and integration into the social and academic environment of the college are also influential. Studies conducted at Burlington County College (BCC) in New Jersey have revealed a 45% attrition rate between fall 1977 and fall 1978 among full-time freshmen, and a 20% second-semester attrition rate among fall 1978 freshmen. Research concerning the objectives of dropouts and their reasons for withdrawal indicated that 30% of the respondents to a 1988 survey had enrolled to complete an associate degree and then transfer, while over 60% indicated such primary goals as completing courses for transfer, personal interest, new job skills, or career change. Students' reasons for withdrawal were not related to circumstances over which the college had control. In an effort to develop a definition of persistence, the records of 438 graduates were studied to determine students' grade point average, degree received, full-/part-time status, transfer status, years taken to complete the degree, breaks in attendance, and initial academic status. Study findings included the following: (1) 36% of the graduates attended BCC full-time, 64% part-time, and 40% as transfer students; (2) full-time students took an average of 3 years to obtain a degree, while part-time students took an average of 9 years; and (3) 15% of the full-time students and 17% of the part-time students stopped out for periods ranging from 1 to 16 years during their attendance. (ALB)

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TOWARD A DEFINITION OF STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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Toward a Definition of Student Persistence at the Community College

Introduction

College and university planners are increasingly concerned about problems related to the retention of students. Colleges which receive state aid that is based upon ever increasing enrollment are in the forefront in their concern with high student attrition. This concern is further intensified with the projections of a dwindling of the number of high school graduates. Students dropping out, stopping out, and transferring to other schools make institutional planning a perplexing process.

Background and Significance

The issues of the retention of students in the colleges and universities of our nation have been with us for several years. The concern did not receive much attention when there was a surplus of academically prepared high school students applying for a limited number of spaces at a smaller number of selective colleges and universities. As the background and experiences of the college-going population became more diverse and as the concept of the open admission college gained popularity, the issue of retaining those students who had expressed a desire for post-secondary education became more obvious.

During the 1960's more than 10 million students entered over 2500 two-year and four-year colleges and universities. Fewer than half graduated on schedule (received a degree in two or four

years) and thirty to forty percent never earned a degree. In the 1970's more than 15 million students entered 3,000 colleges and universities and the rate of completion remained unchanged. In 1986 alone, 2.8 million students entered an institution of higher education in the United States. If past trends continue, approximately 1.6 million of these students will leave their first institution without obtaining a degree. Although a great deal has been written about this situation, there continues to be much "we don't know about the longitudinal process of student leaving and the complex interplay of forces which give rise to it" (Tinto, 1987). In addition, the literature is filled with stereotypes of the character and causes of student departure.

The significance of this investigation is timely when considering the recommendations of the College Outcomes Advisory Committee report to the New Jersey Board of Higher Education. (1987) That report states that student development should be assessed at each institution using common statewide definitions for each of the following indicators: (1) retention rates, (2) program completion, including graduation rates, (3) grade point averages, (4) credit completion rates, (5) licensure and certification examination results, and (6) post-collegiate activities including job/career information, and further education.

Research Concerns

Major matters related to the persistence of students from community colleges include: (1) the purpose of the community

college; (2) the reasons students attend the community college; (3) the reasons students leave the college; and (4) the implications student enrollment patterns have on community colleges.

The community college has, by its nature and definition, the responsibility of meeting the educational needs of the community it serves. As the community changes, the college should also change. The diverse needs of the community must be monitored so that the college can make appropriate program and policy changes.

With a widely diverse student population, it is to be expected that there would be equally disparate reasons for attending the community college. Students with an Associate or Bachelor's Degree may have different reasons for attending than persons who are preparing to transfer to an upper division college or university. In a similar manner, the student who is recently divorced and needs to obtain job skills has different motivation for attending than the student who is merely seeking personal enrichment. The community college must know the primary educational goals of its students. If the student attends the community college to upgrade skills required for transfer to his or her first choice institution, the community college has met its responsibility if the student achieves that goal. If however, the college does not know the objectives of that student (or if the student changes objectives) and the student leaves prior to earning an associates degree, the student is recorded as

a dropout. The college should have facts and figures to present to decision-makers responsible for the institutions.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this paper, the following definitions apply:

1. Drop-out - a student who has not registered for courses for a period of five years or more.

2. Full-time student - a student who is primarily full-time while attending college,

3. Part-time student - a student who is primarily part-time while attending college,

4. Persister - a student who has received an AA, AS, AAS or certificate.

5. Stop-out - a student who stops registering for classes for a period of from one semester to nine semesters (less than five years).

6. Transfer - a student who transfers six or more credits from another college which apply to the degree.

Assumptions and Limitations

1. This investigation included only those August 1987, December 1987, April 1988 and June 1988 graduates.

2. This study was limited only to Burlington County College (BCC) and may not applicable to other institutions but still should be suggestive for any community college that has these concerns.

Review of the Related Literature

The retention of students in postsecondary institutions has long been a concern of faculty, administrators, and students. A review of the literature reveals an abundance of material on the subject. Some of the authors whose names appear in the literature include Alexander Astin, Lee Noel, Randy Levitz, Robert Cope, William Hannah, Ernest Pascarella, Patrick Terenzini and Vincent Tinto. These and others have attempted to identify factors which can be used as predictors of success in retaining students. They have also attempted to isolate strategies which institutions can employ that would enhance the retention rate of students.

One of the themes which repeatedly appears in the literature concerns the interaction of students and faculty. This interaction has been identified as one of the primary determiners of student persistence. As reported by Noel and Levitz, research studies are unanimous regarding the role of faculty in retaining students. It has been found that "the quality of the relationship between students and their professors is critical in determining satisfaction with the institution" (Noel and Levitz, 1985: 383). In other reports it was found that the retention factor considered to be most important at all types of institutions was a "caring attitude of faculty and staff" (Noel and Levitz, 1985: 384). The authors identified specific ways in which faculty involvement could be implemented. Included were the involvement of faculty at orientation, faculty

identification in alerting students of potential problems, and the way in which students are assigned to faculty advisors.

Relative to the issue of student-faculty interaction and its impact on student retention is a study by Pascarella and Chapman. The results of this longitudinal study of 2,326 full-time freshman indicated that at commuter institutions, opportunities for involvement are so limited that social integration has no meaning in terms of bonds to the institution. The study was looking at the social and academic integration of students at 1) four-year residential institutions, 2) two-year commuter, and 3) four-year commuter institutions. The authors found that affiliation needs had a negative effect on retention in the two-year commuter sample. It appeared that the two-year commuter students with high affiliation needs tended to withdraw voluntarily, perhaps transferring to a residential institution with a more social involvement. Goal commitment of the student had the greatest direct effect on persistence in the two-year commuter college sample. It was concluded that "perhaps a major portion of persistence/withdrawal behavior is so idiosyncratic, in terms of external circumstances and personal propensities, that it is difficult to capture in any rational explanatory model" (Pascarella and Chapman, 1983: 98). This study did reveal, however, that at four-year commuter institutions, student commitment to the institution was stronger than student goal commitment. The reverse was true at two-year commuter institutions. At both two and four-year commuter institutions,

academic integration between the student and the college had a stronger indirect effect on persistence than did social integration. Background traits had direct effects on persistence with both commuter samples.

Others to examine the effects of student-faculty interaction include Jean Endo and Richard Harpel. The four aspects of student-faculty interaction that they examined were: 1) the frequency of formal interaction, 2) the frequency of informal interaction, 3) the quality of faculty advising and, 4) the helpfulness of faculty. According to these authors, "research has indicated that student-faculty interaction is important in encouraging student's persistence at an institution" (Endo and Harpel, 1986: 116). Another promising explanation for understanding the effects of student-faculty interaction has come from Spady and Tinto. They have conceptualized the process of interaction between the individual and the institution to explain attrition. According to these authors,"the degree to which a student is integrated into the social and academic system of the college will determine the degree of persistence" (Endo and Harpel, 1982: 116). To test this explanation, a student outcomes model was developed at the University of Denver. The model included background characteristics, expectation variables, and formal and informal interactions. The background characteristics were: 1) demographic and academic variables, 2) sex, 3) socioeconomic status, 4) program type, 5) academic ability and 6) religiousness. The expectation variables included: 1) making

friends, 2) finding friendly faculty, 3) exciting classes, 4) extra-curricular activities, and 5) openness to change. The formal and informal interactions were: 1) quality of the faculty, 2) academic and vocational advising and 3) helpfulness of the faculty. The outcomes model consisted of five instruments. They were the Freshman Questionnaire, the Educational Experience Survey, the Exiting Student Survey, the Graduating Student Survey, and the Alumni Survey. Many of the items on the freshman questionnaire were duplicated on the alumni survey. It was concluded that the frequency of informal student-faculty interactions affected nine of the fourteen outcomes whereas the frequency of the formal student-faculty interactions influenced only two of the outcomes. Formal involvement in extracurricular activities and satisfaction with the students' education had negative outcomes. The conclusion was that faculty can make a difference. They must realize that mere frequency of interaction is not enough. Students respond to informal interaction more than just formal advising. For this to occur, faculty need to be friendly and accessible.

Vincent Tinto in Leaving College has indicated that a good deal of the literature is filled "with stereotypes of the character and causes of student departure" (Tinto, 1987: 3). Dropouts are often portrayed as having a distinct personality profile or as lacking whatever it is that is required for successful completion. He also stateed that the literature does not distinguish those attributes of successful programs that are

institution-specific from those which are essential to the success of all types of retention efforts. The programs are general and descriptive rather than explanatory in nature. The underlying concern should be for the social and intellectual growth of the student. If that goal is met, retention will follow. He then asked what are the goals of the institution and what are the goals of the student, particularly underprepared and adult students.

Tinto referred to the two-year college sector report of the National Longitudinal Survey of 1972. In that survey, almost thirty percent of the students at two-year colleges persisted over the two-year period with thirteen percent obtaining a degree. Over an extended period, twenty-seven percent of the two-year cohort would obtain a degree from the institution from which they start. Seventy-three percent would depart, forty-two percent would transfer and of that forty-two percent, eighty-one percent transfer to a four year college. About one-half of those transfers obtain a degree. Of those who transfer to another two-year college (about nineteen percent), approximately one-third obtain a degree. So in total, forty-two percent of two-year entrants who continuously enroll earn a college degree of some type. This leaves fifty-eight percent who depart college (some will later earn a degree).

Tinto later developed a model which acknowledges the highly individual nature of each student departure. In spite of the vast diversity, he has found a number of common themes as to the

primary causes of individual withdrawal from institutions of higher education. These themes relate to the orientation of individuals who enter higher education as well as to the character of their interactional experiences after they become students. "On the individual level, the two attributes that stand out as primary roots of departure are described by the terms intention and commitment." (Tinto, 1987: 39) These are important personal dispositions of entering students. They set the boundaries of attainment as well as "color the character" of individual experiences while at the institutions.

On the institutional level, there are four descriptive terms of individual experiences which affect departure. The terms are adjustment, difficulty, incongruence and isolation. "Each describes an important interactional outcome arising from individual experiences within an institution" (Tinto, 1987: 39). Tinto hastens to add that although identified as institutional factors, these terms which may shape institutional departure cannot be separated from the personality the individual brings to the campus.

Some research employing Tinto's theory varies from the aforementioned findings. Williamson and Creamer found that Tinto's model does not have the power to explain the dropout phenomenon in two-year commuter colleges, although it has served to enhance knowledge of the dropout issue in most of higher education. They replicated a study by Munro of Yale. This was generally consistent with the Tinto model which found that

dropout occurs when students are not integrated into the social and academic environment of the college. The Williamson and Creamer study did make one major modification from most of the retention research. Most studies define the dropout as a person who fails to return after the freshman year. This study expanded the definition to include students who had been out of college for at least twenty months.

The results of the study support Tinto's efforts at explaining student persistence at the institutional level "because social and academic integration had more influence on decisions pertaining to institutional persistence than they did on decisions pertaining to persistence in higher education" (Williamson and Creamer, 1988: 216). Their findings indicate that "background characteristics of students may be more influential than institutional characteristics in explaining long-term persistence behavior of students in higher education. For two- year students in particular, institutionally based factors play a less important role than background characteristics in the ultimate decision to continue or terminate involvement in post-secondary education" (Williamson and Creamer, 1988: 216). The authors concluded that the most important implication of their research would be to consider a standardized definition of persistence. When less stringent definitions are used, the social and academic integration of the student has a more dominant influence on persistence. When the definition is more strict, background characteristics have a

comparatively stronger influence over social and academic integration.

Previous Studies at Burlington County College

The Office of Research and Planning at Burlington County College surveys current and previously enrolled students. The primary purpose of the surveys is to determine the degree to which students are satisfied with the academic and non-academic services of the college.

Attrition data for the entering freshman classes of 1976, 1977 and 1978 were collected. Only full-time students who were recent high school graduates were surveyed. For the students starting in the Fall of 1976, over fifty percent were not in attendance in the Spring of 1978 and the remaining forty-seven percent of these students were still attending or graduating in Spring of 1978. Of the entering full-time freshman in the Fall of 1977, fifty-four percent either graduated or were still pursuing their degree in the Spring of 1979. "The attrition rate at the beginning of Fall 1978 was over forty-five percent for this group of students." (Report #79/80-02) The study of the first-time full-time students in the Fall of 1978 followed students into the second semester. The results indicated a twenty percent attrition rate in that population.

Several other studies from the Office of Research and Planning have been conducted to ascertain ways in which the college can better retain students. As recently as February 1988, the 2,450 students who attended in Fall Semester 1987 but

did not return in the Spring Semester 1988 were surveyed. Over one third of the respondents (there was a thirty percent response rate) listed as their primary goal for enrolling "to complete an associate degree and then transfer to a bachelor's program at a four-year college." (Burlington County College, 1988) Over sixty percent indicated primary goals such as completing courses for transfer, personal interest, and completing course (s) for new job skills or career change. A high percentage (twenty-two percent) felt that they had largely or partially achieved their goal after attending the Fall 1987 Semester. When asked why they didn't return, the most frequent response was conflict between job and studies. Of the adult female population, family responsibilities were often listed as a reason for not returning.

During the pre-enrollment period and into each fall semester the new Burlington County College students are sent a Student Profile Questionnaire. In the Fall Semester 1986, 781 students returned the questionnaire. Of the number, forty-three percent intended to be full-time students and fifty-five percent intended to be part-time students. When asked to describe their ultimate educational objective, eight percent checked to take college courses, two percent to obtain a certificate, twenty percent to obtain an associate degree, thirty-three percent to earn a bachelor's degree, twelve percent to obtain a master's degree, and five percent plan to earn a doctorate or professional degree. Seventeen percent were undecided about their future educational plans. Seventy percent expressed an intent to earn some form of

degree.

In data collected from full-time newly admitted students, fifty-nine to sixty percent indicate they plan to obtain a BCC degree prior to full-time employment or transfer (Burlington County College. 1985, 1986). For the years 1983, 1984, and 1985, the actual persistence rate for full-time student between the freshman and sophomore year was thirty-nine percent. (When the sophomore full-time and part-time students are included, the percentage increases to fifty-three percent)

Procedures and Methodology

As indicated in the review of the related literature, Burlington County College has attempted to collect data concerning the reasons students attend the college and the reasons they leave. When graduates and "dropouts" were queried regarding their collegiate experiences, they have generally and consistently expressed satisfaction. They also stated that the reasons for leaving are not related to circumstances over which the college has control. Pascarella and Chapman achieved similar findings. Much of the retention research is limited to freshman/sophomore persistence. In addition, the two-year commuter student (particularly the part-time student) has not been as extensively mentioned as has the four-year student.

Williamson and Creamer concluded that there was a need to consider a standardized definition of persistence. The purpose of this paper was to have been a study of faculty/student interaction and its role in student retention. The review of

both the related literature and Burlington County College student and graduate follow-up reports changed the emphasis of the study. If the students expressed satisfaction with their college experience and reported external factors as causing their departure, was it necessary to study student/faculty interaction as a factor in the retention of students? Was there a retention problem or were students persisting toward a degree at a two-year college in ways that differed from the traditional four-year institution? It became apparent that there was a need to differentiate between the full-time and part-time student in defining student persistence at the community college. To develop a definition of persistence, the records of 438 graduates were studied. Although many community college students do not plan to earn a degree, this paper addressed only those students who did obtain a degree from Burlington County College.

The data which was collected and analyzed included was: 1) the grade point average, 2) the degree (AA, AS, AAS) received, 3) student status (FT or PT), 4) whether the student transferred credits from another college toward the BCC degree, 5) the number of years taken to complete the degree, 6) breaks in attendance and 7) the initial academic status of the student (developmental or ready for college level courses).

Results

The review of the literature prompted a visit to the office of the registrar. The registrar was asked how long after a student leaves the college is the record retained in an active

status. The response was that most students who leave the community college will return within a period of five years, if they return to the college. This includes both graduates and students who do not graduate. The period of five years is based on the registrar's experience at Camden County College, Roxboro Community College in Boston, and at Burlington County College. This experience became the basis of the definition of a drop-out and a stop-out.

A review of the records of the 438 graduates revealed the following:

1. 158 (36%) of the graduates were full-time students,
2. 280 (64%) of the graduates were part-time students,
3. 176 (40%) of the graduates were transfer students.

Of the full-time students, it took an average of three years at BCC to obtain a degree. Sixty-four (15%) of these graduates stopped out prior to earning their degree. Forty-five (22%) of these graduates were transfer students.

Of the part-time students, it took an average of nine years at BCC to obtain a degree. Forty-seven (17%) of these graduates stopped out prior to earning their degree. 131 (47%) of these graduates were transfer students. Twenty-five percent of the students stopped out prior to obtaining a degree. The number of years they were "out" ranged from one year to sixteen years. The majority of full and part-time students completed their degree requirements within fifteen years.

Discussion, Implications and Recommendations

Much of the research regarding the retention of students has been conducted by four-year colleges and universities. Although this research has considered the student at the two-year commuter campus, the study of the two-year student has not been a priority. Pascarella and Chapman seem to have captured it best when referring to the two-year student by stating that "perhaps a major portion of persistence/withdrawal behavior is so idiosyncratic, in terms of external circumstances and personal propensities, that it is difficult to capture in any rational explanatory model" (1983).

The findings of this study indicate that of those students who persist and graduate, it takes an average of three years for the primarily full-time student to earn a degree. For the primarily part-time student, the average is nine years. To refer to the community college as a two-year college is somewhat of a misnomer for many students. It is also obvious that many community college students demonstrate persistence while working toward their degree. Realizing this, institutions should consider modifying their thinking to reflect a student persistence model rather than a student retention model. As previously noted, "external circumstances and personal propensities" do affect the enrollment patterns of two-year college students. To design instructional and student service strategies which better enable student persistence is more appropriate than to think of ways to retain students.

The overall retention of students in a two-year college cannot be easily determined by comparing student attendance from semester to another semester. It cannot be determined by following students within a single institution and probably within a single state because of transfer patterns.

This study examined only graduates. A recommendation for further study would be to examine the initial reasons individual students attend and leave college and longitudinally track those students. The tracking should include student expectations upon entering the college, changes in reasons for attending, reasons for leaving, and reasons for returning. The research should attempt to gather specific information regarding individual attrition and institutional characteristics which affect student persistence. To determine the degree to which direct retention interventions, such as formal and informal student/faculty involvement, plays a role in the persistence rate of community college commuter students, it would be necessary to contact currently enrolled as well as past students and ask specific questions relative to that involvement. Information gleaned from the degree and non-degree seeking students will provide information from which to define student persistence at the community college.

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